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ABSTRACT

A study examined intervention activities for students identified as having high communication anxiety (CA). The study utilized 2 group interventions. Of 61 students in an introductory speech class invited to participate, the 8 who accepted were divided into 2 groups of 4. The groups met for 5 weeks. Group 1, facilitated by a female counseling psychologist, focused on group members' self-esteem issues and their relationship to communication apprehension, with the hypothesis that with a more positive sense of self, there would be less anxiety related to public speaking. Results for this group indicated that subjects had learned to deal with anxiety by thinking differently about themselves. A cognitive restructuring approach was used in group 2, facilitated by a male counselor-in-training, with a therapeutic approach to working with anxiety. The hypothesis was that students who learned to identify and change their self-talk, which was destructive and interfering, would be less anxious in public speaking situations. Findings for this group suggest that subjects became aware of their approaches to situations and had learned to identify and change self-talk messages. (Contains 20 references.) (CR)

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COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION INTERVENTION: A Report of a Spring 1995 Pilot Study Program Utilizing Self-Esteem Measures and Cognitive Restructuring as Intervention Strategies for High CA students in the Basic Course.

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PROGRAM PRESENTED FOR

SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION CONVENTION
November 18, 1995
San Antonio, TX

CS 509233

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Communication Apprehension Intervention Training
Program for the 1995 SCA Convention.

The program will focus on presenting the activities and results from a study conducted during the Spring Semester 1995 under the collaboration of the Health and Counseling Center, Department of Communication and an Assistant Professor of the Councelor Education Department at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. The study is explained as follows;

INTERVENTION PROGRAM
TO ACCOMPANY THE FUNDAMENTALS OF SPEECH

Each group will be limited to 8-12 students who will meet once a week for five weeks. All students in the two sections identified will complete the instruments noted below. All students, regardless of scores on the PRCA, will be given the opportunity to participate with the optional group experience. Only the group facilitators (not the instructor of the course) will have access to the results of the instruments used in the intervention. Students will be assured of the confidentiality of the group experience.

INSTRUMENTATION:
Dimensions of Self-Concept (1991) Michael, W.B., Smith, R.A. & Michael, J.J.

State-Trait Anxiety Scale (1970) Spielberger, C.D., Gorsuch, R.L., & Lushene, R.

Personal Report of Communication Anxiety (1985) McCroskey, J.

The combination of instruments, administered pre- and post-intervention, would provide "pictures" of the individuals involved. In addition to the communication apprehension experienced by an individual, it is important to know the generalized anxiety level which will be measured by the State - Trait Anxiety Scale. Dimensions of self-concept, as measured by this instrument, included levels of aspiration, anxiety, academic interest and satisfaction, leadership and initiative, and identification vs. alienation. It appears to be the best self-concept measure for a college poplulation. All instruments are self-report; none of the instruments is lengthy or difficult to complete.

This paper offers a practical, collabrative program to incorporate intervention activities for students identified as having high CA. Utilizing strategies readily available in published texts and/or the expertise of counseling psychologists on the campus allows for potential accessiblity to any oral communication instructor "who 'chooses to so something (i.e., not to ignore the problem)'". Additionally, many of our professional meetings, regionally and nationally, are finding program space for Instructional Development Division (SCA) issues concerning CA as well as the Commission on Communication Apprehension (SCA) short course for training in intervention techniques.

Offering adjunct sections of intervention groups handled by trained professionals in counseling psychology to only those students who have scored high on the PRCA and then are willing to participate in the special sections will increase the likelihood of greater success for those students. The potential for some sort of stigma to be attached to being in this sort of group is fairly well reduced in the college setting as students self-select for many reasons. Literally thousands of students at UW-Whitewater, participate in co-curricular programs in health issues, career planning and job searches and are willing to accept and respect those who recognize their own limitations and seek ways to overcome them.

As higher education is focusing on the improvement of undergraduate education, Borhis and Allen (1992) challenge educators "to be sensitive to the special needs of the apprehensive student,

adapt instructional strategies accordingly, and encourage these students to participate in treatment programs to alleviate their apprehension".

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION
Group Interventions

Rationale for two group interventions:

1. Literature in the fields of counseling and psychology suggests that persons struggling with anxiety can learn to deal differently with their thoughts, feelings and behaviors and reduce the levels of anxiety in their lives.

2. Literature in communications and counseling suggests that there is a relationship between self-talk, self-esteem and anxiety.

3. Cognitive behavioral approaches have been shown to be effective and efficient when working with numerous anxiety disorders.

4. Comparisons and contrasts between groups could provide future directions for dealing with larger numbers of students.

Framework for two groups:

All persons in two introductory speech classes were invited to participate. While sixteen (of 61) students indicated an interest, only eight students attended the first (and subsequent) group meetings. Four persons were assigned to each group; groups met at the same time (late afternoon), but in different locations and with different facilitators, for five weeks. There was no extra credit, or other external motivators for participation with the groups. The instructor was not aware of who was and was not involved with the group interventions (unless they self-identified).

Group 1:

Facilitated by a female Counseling Psychologist, Group 1 focused on self-esteem issues of group members. Structured as a counseling group, the experience was designed to help all members explore and understand self-esteem issues and their relationship to communication apprehension. The hypothesis was that with a more positive sense of self, there would be less anxiety related to public speaking.

During the first session, participants were introduced to the concepts of self-esteem, become acquainted with one another and began to develop trust within the group, and outlined purposes and structures for the group experience. Sessions 2, 3, and 4 encouraged individual exploration within the group setting. A number of paper and pencil and experiential activities, including guided imagery, self-portraits, compliments and feedback session, were used to aid in the process. Session 5 made specific links between self-esteem and communication anxiety (particularly related to public speaking) with specific application to the introductory speech class.

In the written evaluation of the experience, all members indicated that they had learned about themselves and their anxiety. All members suggested that they believed they would be able to deal with their anxiety differently by thinking differently about themselves and meanings they were attaching to performance and others' evaluations. Several members suggested that more direct "practice" with public speaking would have been helpful in the group setting. There was also a request for a "reunion" (which was subsequently scheduled) to check back with members to see how they were doing (with speech class, and in general). Overall, the evaluations of members were very positive; they were appreciative of the opportunity to be involved.

Group 2:

Facilitated by a male counselor-in-training (who was supervised by the Counseling Psychologist facilitating group 1), Group 2 was based on a cognitive restructuring approach. Dr. David Burns' therapeutic approach to working with anxiety was used as the foundation for the group. A teaching/rehearsing perspective is used to consider self-talk and learn more helpful messages. The hypothesis was that if students learned to identify and change their self-talk which was distructive and interfering, they would be less anxious in public speaking situations.

Throughout the five sessions, there was extensive teaching about cognitions and self-talk. Initially, the focus was on idetnification of self-talk generally; the group members then considered self-talk related to public speaking. After labelling negative self-talk, group members were taught principles of restructuring. Group members spent time in the group sessions practicing constructive, positive messages. Members assisted one another with identifying self-talk and constructing new statements. A number of paper-and-pencil and homework assignments were used to facilitate the process.

Overall evaluation of the group experience was positive (though there were attendance problems with two of four members mid group process). Members reported being more aware of how they were approaching situations, and what messages had become "automatic" for them. They learned to identify their self-talk, but believed they would need to continue practicing new messages (consistent with anxiety research which indicates that rehearsal and reinforcement is important) for them to become integrated with new ways of thinking. Several members reported that they would have preferred individual assistance, rather than a group setting.

Data analysis: Early analysis suggests that as a group, members of these two speech classes were reporting anxiety (both state and trait) which was somewhat higher than their norm group (when considering the STAI and college norms). Interestingly, the responses on the PRCA did not indicate particularly exaggerated anxiety (if 63 - 85 is taken as the normal range) as it relates to communications. Of the various aspects of communications assessed

by the PRCA, public speaking was clearly the greatest concern for the largest number of respondents. Given the size of the experimental groups, no conclusions can be offered related to overall effectiveness of group interventions. Continued analysis of the data is being pursued to look at pre- and post- differences for the whole group (as well as for the intervention groups).

It is clear from a follow-up phone study that students are cautious about their investments of time. The five-week period was likely too long (at least prior to involvement, not knowing specific); there was an unwillingness to make that commitment (responses on the phone survey suggested they "just didn't have time"). This is consistent with the experiences of counseling centers nationwide; while we know that group interventions are most effective (and efficient) for many concerns, students prefer individual assistance. Alternate approaches (in-class presentations, lab settings, etc.) will be pursued within the confines of present resources to be able to address students' and instructors' concerns.

OVERALL PROJECT SUMMARY

As indicated in the data analysis, the small sample of students for this project makes any significant conclusion irrlevant. The authors of this project are continuing to work with the University Health and Counseling Center (UHCC) to delvelop a program to be conducted by trained graduate assistants in the Counseling program. The lack of solid numbers from which to draw conclusions could be attributed to several factors; consideration must be given to the fact that students did not have comprehensive understanding of the proposed program, the time frame of the intervention was not conducive to student schedules especially with no extrinsic reward (ie. extra-credit), and a preference for individual assistance.

It must be noted here also, there seems to be another stumbling block to the development of this program. There is a lack of willingness to committ to a new program in the light of severe budget constraints. On the Department level, the Chair for the Department of Communication deferred to the other members of the Department in supporting the theory of the project "as long as no additional staff or funding is needed". In developing the collabrative angle of the project, the Director of the UHCC was consulted in order to utliize resources that were already available. However, shortly after the onset of the project, she left that position to take an Assistant-Professorship in the Counselor Education Department. Although her committment to the project is still strong, her current position as Chair of the Department of Counselor Education has curtailed the amount of time she had envisioned would be available to administrate the project.

On the College level, the Deans of both the College of Education and Arts and Communication were invited to meet with the Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs, Director of UHCC and program coordinators, to provide guidance and ownership for the program. Neither of them attended, and have given only a cursory approval as the University is under an order to re-oraganize and reallocate resources. There was some question as to whether this was an "academic" problem or a "student support service" problem and the respective Vice-Chancellors have yet to agree on it's proper place. In meeting with the Director of Student Retention and Academic Support Services, the co-ordinators were told that cuts in staff and funding would not allow for any additional new program development as each of the staff in that area were already overextended.

Currently, the Director of UHCC is training two graduate assistants to develop and run the program for four sections of the Basic Course in the Spring semester of '96, with an eye to early intervention and promoting the intrinsic benefits for self-improvment.

It is the intention of the authors of this project to conduct follow up analysis to develop more solid conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the intervention strategies detailed in this report. It seems the "turf" question has been resolved by the current Director of the UHCC and the authors of the project and it is expected there will be much more significant numbers participating with the next program due to a clearer explaination of the program itself and the use of class time to facilitate the intervention itself.

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